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CHAPTER VIII

INTER-VILLAGE FIGHTS. THE LAW OF REVENGE

THE Egyptian *fellāḥīn* are by no means a military people, but in their inter-village fights, which are not of infrequent occurrence, they sometimes display a quite surprising ferocity. It must be remembered that to the Egyptian peasant his own village is the centre of the universe, and people of other villages, though treated with hospitality and courtesy as visitors, are, in some cases, looked upon with as much suspicion as if they were positive aliens. As will be seen later on, hostilities between adjacent villages were no less a marked feature of Egyptian life in antiquity than at the present day.

The inhabitants of some mutually hostile villages hardly ever meet without at least attempting to pick a quarrel, and I have been myself a spectator of such conflicts on more than one occasion. In most parts of the world it is usually found that the market-place is neutral ground, and that there even the most antagonistic peoples will meet unarmed. In some parts of Egypt, however, not only is the market-place the site regularly chosen for village conflicts, but fights which take place there are by no means confined to non-market-days! Various weapons (Figs. 57 and 58) are used at these inter-village encounters. The commonest are the *nabbūt* (a very stout single-stick), a primitive type of spear, and a battleaxe. The spear consists of a long wooden shaft terminating in a slender iron point or in a plain or barbed leaf-shaped blade. The axe is a long pole surmounted by a winged iron head. Stones too are used, and are thrown with deadly effect.

The first battle of this kind that I witnessed took place in connexion with the sinking of a large boat in a canal, the muddy bottom of which held it fast. An attempt had to be made to raise the vessel, to which two strong ropes were attached by divers. Large crowds had collected on either side of the canal, and the services of some of these people were enlisted in the efforts to raise the boat, but most of them, like myself, were mere spectators.

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The two ropes attached to the boat by the divers were very long, as well as strong, and one was held by either group of helpers (Fig. 59). First one rope was pulled by the men on one bank, then, after a few turns, the other was tugged from the other side of the canal. This went on regularly for some time, the whole proceeding being well organized by the officer in charge of the district. However, as it turned out, the two groups of people facing one another across the canal belonged to two antagonistic villages, and, before long, stones of considerable size began to fly from one bank to another. The officer, an old friend of mine, rushed up and begged me to take shelter while he settled the matter, but I was far too interested to beat a retreat, as I wanted to see what would happen. He, armed with a stout *kurbāg* (a very powerful leather whip), rushed in among the crowd that had actually started the fray, slashing right and left. By this display of promptitude and courage he put an end to what might have been a serious and bloody fight. Meanwhile, I dodged about trying to get a snapshot of the combat, but the excited crowds, rushing hither and thither, frustrated all my endeavours. Eventually the villagers who started the fight were no longer allowed to assist, and were made to squat in rows at a distance, in dire disgrace They appeared utterly unmoved, and when I spoke to them and

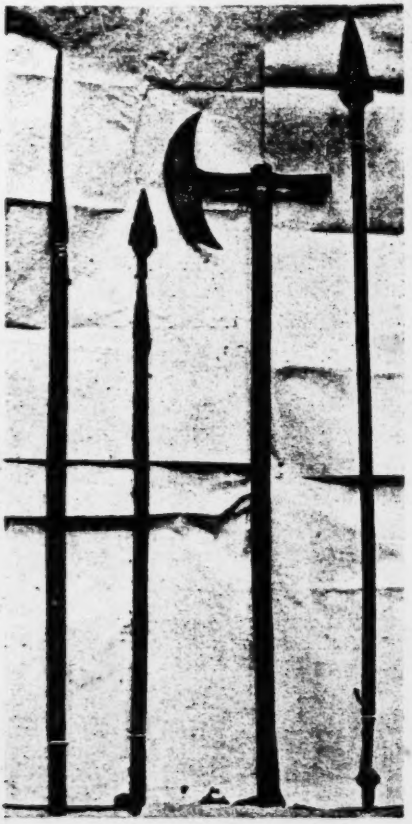

FIG. 57. WEAPONS USED IN BLOOD-FEUDS AND INTER-VILLAGE FIGHTS

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One of the customs that one would be glad to see die out in Egypt is the blood-feud. As far as I can gather from scholars acquainted with the ancient history of the country, this custom does not seem to be a native one. I fancy it must have been introduced into Egypt at the time of the Arab conquest. It is a very terrible custom, and one that will be very difficult to abolish, for many of these family feuds have persisted for several generations, and still continue with no sign of abatement. The weapons used in con-

FIG. 50. CROWD PULLING THE ROPES TO RAISE THE SUNKEN VESSEL

nexion with blood-feuds are often the same as those used in inter-village fights, though firearms are sometimes employed. The rule is, so I was told, that the murderer, or a member of his family, must be killed by the avenger with exactly the same form of weapon as he (the murderer) used, and, if possible, on the very spot where the murder to be avenged was committed.

One day, as I was riding through the cultivation, an Egyptian friend of mine who was with me pointed to a certain place in the fields where a man had lately been strangled by a large handkerchief being tightly knotted round his throat. Shortly afterward, my friend told me, vengeance was taken by a member of the victim's family, who killed one of the murderer's relatives in the same way